

The Boundaries of *Fictio*

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Abstract

This essay surveys four articles of the section dedicated to the boundaries of fiction in literature, scientific discourse, and other areas of human creativity. The section is supposed to contribute to the study of a broad range of the problems of literary theory, such as the interaction between literature and other social practices, resulting in the creation of a particular discourse of ‘reality’ and ‘objectivity’, and the highly controversial issue of the relationship between ‘material’ and ‘form’ in the literary text.

Keywords

Fiction, fact, objectivity, literary theory, formalism

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This section (which will continue in the next issue of *Enthymema*) features four diverse essays dealing with literary phenomena of different literary ages. Our aim is to focus on the borderlines of literature as a special type of human creativity and to analyse a broad range of problems emerging in the ‘border area’ where literature meets other creative practices and interacts with them. It should be noted at the outset that we are far from endowing the notion of ‘creativity’ with the sole sense of ‘sublimity’, reducing it exclusively to literary or artistic production. We will consider all the types of human activity involved in the production of social life – that is to say, in the continuous, permanent, infinite process of the creation of human society and of man, i.e. a being endowed with a social dimension. Therefore, in this section we set ourselves the goal to examine not only the interaction and interference between literature and scientific disciplines, human as well as natural, but also the changeable relations between literature and various aspects of social and private life, e.g. the functioning of the state machinery (bureaucracy, legal and penitential system), the construction and propagation of ideologies, memorial practices, different forms of *zhiznestroitel'stvo* (*Lebensgestaltung*), social experiments, carried out either consciously or realized spontaneously, etc. Albeit diverse, such social practices share a common feature: each of them – consciously or not – is always confined to its own model of reality and articulated in the language inherent to this very model. Including ‘possible worlds’ created within other practices within its scope, literature appropriates their idiolects in a number of ways – and at the same time sets forth different approaches to the reality on which they are built: from mimicry and passive reception to estrangement (*ostranenie*, to use the Shklovsky’s term) and open conflict, which gives the opportunity to reveal and to demonstrate the ontological foundations of different ‘world models’.

Our study carries on, in a sense, the studies of the ‘elimination of the referent’ of linguistic signs, which takes place when signs become a part of the literary text. At first sight, this may seem a naïve attempt to ‘grasp’ and to express the very moment of dis-

solving and emancipation of word meanings from their ‘material substratum’ – from their concrete ties with the extralinguistic objects: as if it were possible to single out a moment when the thing on the way of transformation into a textual sign, having already lost its corporeal solidity and pretending to exist according to the laws of literature, still preserved the memory of the logic of the world to which it had belonged by virtue of its origin, and of the relations into which it had been previously included. But could one, nowadays, really believe that any of the ‘possible worlds’, invaded by literature in the attempt to appropriate it and to annihilate its right to possess its own objectness and its own logic, actually succeeded to avoid the virtualization before this literary assault? Quite the contrary: one has rather to admit that, in whatever area of objective reality literature comes into play, this area has already been affected by semantic transformations, in many respects similar to those which made possible the emergence of the literary text. Therefore, while evaluating the relationship between literature and other practices, we should get rid of the aboriginal naivety with respect to the ‘form’ and ‘material’, in order to tackle to another kind of naivety. We intend by the aboriginal naivety the view according to which the literature arises from the necessity to shape pre-existing passive material by the active form. This idea dates back to Aristotle: in his *Poetics* he refuses to consider natural-scientific writings arranged in verse as poetry. The ‘mechanistic’ intuition that we defined as aboriginal naivety becomes apparent in the turning points in art history – in the moments when the question «What is literature?» resurfaces. At the dawn of the Renaissance, Petrarch’s minor peer, Lino Coluccio Salutati, desiring to include the great and beautiful *Iliad* into Latin culture, proposed to supply with rhetorical embellishments the monstrous Latin translation of Homer’s poem made by Leonzio Pilato, a Calabrian with a very poor command of Latin. The members of a group founded in post-revolutionary Russia, which called itself ‘The left front of the arts’ (LEF), claimed for ‘revolution in the literature’, which was supposed to reject the ‘rotten’ literature of fiction, to critically reinstate constants of literature such as *prijom* (‘technique’ or ‘device’ in the English translations of V. Shklovsky’s essay), image and typization, and to address the ‘literature of the affirmation of fact’, the ‘art of the promotion of fact’, that is, documentary genres and forms which reflect ‘immediately’ and then ‘truthfully’ the objective reality and prevent the deformation of this reality through ‘the devices and forms, organically alien to our epoch’. All these events in literary history, though very distant from each other, are examples of this aboriginal naivety, based on the axiom of the discrimination of ‘material’: the sophisticated form ‘tames’ the rough material, like Botticelli’s Minerva bridles the centaur (even the members of LEF, who declared the priority of ‘facts’ on the ‘forms’, cannot avoid using language, fixing the power of form).

It seems that the linguistic, virtual character of a great number of social practices gives the possibility to address and to conceive them in a way similar to that proposed by Husserl for ‘empirical sciences’, when he claimed the necessity of regional ontologies for clarifying the *ratio* of particular traditional areas of scientific knowledge. Social constructions, industry, circulation of documents, daily care of the most elementary needs of the familiar or individual life – each of these spheres, in the moment we approach it, unfolds as a narrative, compiled in a language, the literal meanings of which are, as a rule, forgotten long ago, and the grammatical and syntactical relations reflect only indirectly the ties between the objects that this language was supposed to describe. The referents in such a language represent a serious problem. We can hardly be sure while speaking of them. Such is the material when it enters the sight of the ‘literature’. Literature appropriates ‘material’ already transformed in the system of signs – in the form of a language, bearing

the energy of the semantic transformations by which it had been generated and is placed at the disposal of literature in order to undergo the same processes by which it has been created. That is to say that there is no huge cleft between the language of *fictio* and that of other life practices, as it may seem. Moreover, their structural resemblance reveals a kind of parity between them – their capacity to influence each other and the resembling features in their mode of being. The readiness to recognize the affinity and similarity of the ‘material’ and ‘form’ in literature, justified by the virtual-linguistic nature of the both, constitutes the above-mentioned methodological naivety, substantiating the new phenomenological view of the object. Our aim is to take such an approach in the comparative study of the models of reality, created in literature and other social practices, as well as in the examination of the communicative means correspondent to these models. Our approach will allow us to rethink the relationship between the ‘material’ dimension and ‘form’ throughout the history of *fictio*. This is for example the case of Michael Shumilin’s article, dedicated to a secondary – and therefore particularly representative – episode of the history of the Italian literature of the early *Trecento*, concerning the relation between fact and fiction in the *accessus* to the *Aeneid* by Zono de’ Magnalis. As the author rightly states, «Discussions about the relationship between fact and fiction in poetry are probably as old as literary criticism itself (the lies of Homer were discussed by the first critics of Homer [...]), and already in Hesiod the Muses proclaim to be able to speak both truth and lies that looks like truth). In the various particular classical and medieval theories of the interaction between fact and fiction in poetic texts, a modern literary theorist might find a lot of suggestive ideas, often buried in deep oblivion.» Furthermore, such an approach demonstrates how the exceptional complexity of the linguistic polyphony of the whole multitude of discourses – from the mythology to the natural sciences, from *Realpolitik* to ideology – determines the system of the functional language of the literary work: the study of Susanne Frank, dedicated to the science fiction romance *Sannikov’s land* (published in 1926) by the famous Russian and Soviet geologist V.A. Obruchev (1863-1956) could be an eloquent example of what we say.

A. A. Faustov’s study, built upon a broad range of Russian poetry of the classical period (1780 – 1920), sheds light on another important aspect of the interaction between ‘reality’ and *fictio*: the reflection of the history of the Modern subject in the transformations of the image of the lyrical hero of the poetry or, to be more precise, in the change of the interpretation of the relationship between the lyrical ‘I’ and the author of the poetic text. In our opinion, A. A. Faustov’s article is a convincing example of how the methods of literary science can be successfully applied to the investigations of philosophical and even logical questions – the problems connected with subjectivity and reference, in our case.

Finally, the section features a case-study by E. N. Penskaya. A small essay but significant essay, it draws upon the archive documents and focuses on an episode of the anti-formalist campaign in the URSS of the twenties and thirties, an episode, connected with the disbandment of the Leningrad school of the theatre studies, founded in the 1920s in the State institute for history and arts. The author traces the history of the overthrow of the method, contradicting the official ideology, by collecting the ‘apologetic, accusatory, penitential narratives’ of the process participants and analysing the ways of perverting facts and the valuations, characteristic for different genres and form of the ‘paraliterary’ bureaucratic documentation of the epoch.

In the next issue we hope to continue our investigations along the lines traced in the essays featured in the present section: in particular, we shall focus on early periods of

literary history and on the study of self-understanding of literature, often underestimated by literary theorists; the study of the reciprocal influence between fiction and scientific knowledge in different ages. We shall also to examine a series of other phenomena, connected immediately or indirectly with the relations between the languages of various social practices and literature, such as, e.g., the modal analysis of events in the texts of fictional or non-fictional genres; the conditional approach to the definition of literature and the theoretical aspects of the experiments, connected to the appreciation of the creativity of nonprofessional men of letters.